



NEW EMPLOYEE GUIDE

Human Resources
NRCS Alaska, November 2004



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Overview of USDA

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) serves all Americans daily. The Department's mission is to improve and maintain farm income, to assure consumers safe and adequate food supplies at reasonable prices, and to develop and expand markets for projects abroad. It works to enhance the environment and to maintain production capacity by helping landowners protect the soil, water, forests, and other natural resources. Rural development, credit, and conservation programs are key resources for carrying out National growth policies. Other research covers such areas as animal disease and pest control, crop production, and the marketing and use of agricultural products. In the Department's early years, the vast majority of Americans lived on farms, and farmers produced only enough food to supply themselves and few other people. Today, although less than 3 percent of the population resides on farmland, farm workers produce enough for this country—as well as for a growing export market. Agriculture is, in fact, this Nation's largest industry and its largest employer—approximately 21 million people work in some phase of agriculture—from growing food and fiber to selling it in the supermarket.

Also, Americans enjoy better diets because of USDA's nutrition research, education efforts, and food assistance programs.

USDA research findings, directly or indirectly, benefit all Americans. The Department's thorough inspection and grading services safeguard and assure standards of quality in the daily food supply.

Overview of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

The NRCS came out of troubled times—the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s. Dust storms ravaged the Nation's farmland; stripping away millions of tons of topsoil. Huge dust clouds carried the soil hundreds of miles, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. Since that time, NRCS has kept a commitment to protecting and conserving soil and other natural resources on America's private lands.

The NRCS is known worldwide for its accomplishments and innovations in conservation. The people of NRCS are recognized for their talent, dedication, and ingenuity in making the agency's programs work. Participation in NRCS' programs is voluntary—the people we serve want us with them as they take necessary steps to reduce erosion, protect wildlife, promote good land use, and other measures to preserve the Nation's natural resources for future generations.

At NRCS, we take pride in our partnerships. We work with local soil and water conservation districts to let people know how important it is to conserve natural resources...and, together, we work with them on how to do it.

Conservation Careers—NRCS offers career opportunities for folks who are still in college and for those who have already graduated. Here's an overview of some of those opportunities.

- **Soil Conservationist**—Most of their time is spent in the field working with farmers, ranchers, and other land users. Soil Conservationists offer conservation planning and technical help to everyone from family farmers to local government officials. Suggestions are given to help with ways to

conserve the soil, improve water quality, manage nutrients, and protect and improve wildlife habitat.

- **Soil Conservation Technician**—Technicians assist soil conservationists. Their most important job is working on the land with farmers, ranchers, and others. Soil Conservation Technicians show them how to install conservation practices and oversee the quality of those practices. Engineering surveys and design standard conservation practices such as waterways, terraces, and contour stripcropping systems are also part of the job.
- **Soil Scientist**—Soil Scientists map and classify soil, identify problems such as wetness and erosion, and use aerial photographs to map soils and write soil descriptions and prepare other information about soils. They also sample soil and evaluate soil quality, work with watershed information and water quality reports, and record changes in land use patterns.
- **Biologist**—spend most of their time in the field working with private land owners, other agencies, and units of government. They provide technical support on fish and wildlife habitat development or restoration.
- **Engineer**—NRCS employs a large number of engineers who have specialized skills in erosion control, water management, structural design, construction, hydraulics, soil mechanics, and environmental protection, along with general engineering skills. Job assignments may include establishing stream-bank and erosion control measures and water supply systems; designing waste management systems and concrete and earthen dams; and applying bioengineering principles to solve a host of natural resource problems. Engineers also become involved in helping communities recover from natural disasters.
- **Engineering Technician**—is involved in planning, design, and construction work. Assists the Engineer with surveying the land, plotting notes, and laying out construction measures, gathers data, makes computations, and prepares maps and cross sections of profiles. They may also serve as a construction inspector on a wide variety of projects.
- **Other Careers in NRCS**—Accounting; Agricultural Economics; Agronomy; Aquatic Biology; Business Administration; Cartography, Communications, Computer and information Technology; contracting, Forestry; Geology; Human Resources, Hydrology; Plant Sciences; Rural Sociology; Watershed Management; Wetland Science, and Wildlife Biology.

Policies and Regulations

It will be beneficial for you to read and understand the regulations and policies that affect your work and conduct as an employee. Each Agency within the Department publishes regulations, policies, and procedures to supplement those provided by USDA or provide information on matters that pertain only to the Agency. Information pertinent to employees is contained in directives, manuals, circulars, and instructions. Your Human Resources staff can assist you with this information.

It is your duty to help keep the cost of Government operations to a necessary minimum. You should be alert of any opportunity to improve jobs in your immediate office, other parts of the Agency, or other governmental agencies.

Personal Records

As an employee, you should maintain important personal documents and records. You are responsible for ensuring that your records are current and accurate. Some of your important records include:

- Time and Attendance Reports
- Performance Standards and Appraisals
- Training
- ? Personnel Actions
- ? Position Descriptions
- ? Awards

Some of these records are filed in your Official Personnel Folder (OPF), which is kept in the Human Resources Office. You are entitled to have access to this information. You are, also, responsible for notifying Human Resources of any change in your name, home address, and family status.

Much of your Personal data is now automated through the Human Resource Information System (HRIS), which is accessed through the internet once your employment status is worked through the Human Resources Office. They will provide you with specific access information during the second week of employment. If you do not hear from them on HRIS access you need to initiate contact to work this clearance.

Employee Personal Page is an automated system through the National Finance Center that puts USDA employees in control of processing most of their own personnel-payroll actions (such as financial allotments, open season changes to health benefits, TSP open season changes, direct deposits, federal and state taxes, and home address). You can access the system on the Internet at www.nfc.usda.gov, then click on MY EPP below the Application Launchpad section of the webpage. You need to already be on the agency rolls before access will be granted and My EPP will give you directions on requesting first time access).

You will receive a “Statement of Earnings and Leave” for each pay period that you are employed. The My.EPP site also lets you electronically store and print your pay statements. It is important to verify that the statement accurately reflects required and, where selected, optional deductions. Report any errors, immediately, to your Human Resources Office.

Dress Code

NRCS office dress code is business casual. Your purpose or goal is to dress appropriately for each occasion. Your office or work setting and environment will influence your dress style. Always be neat and clean in whatever you choose to wear. Clothing should be clean and free of rips, tears, or holes. Your dress style will project a positive or negative image about “you”. You broadcast a message in what you wear. We suggest you make an accurate statement in your appearance and transmit a positive, professional image at all times. Remember that your dress is a reflection of you and the Agency. Dress professionally to match the occasion. Shorts, short skirts, crop tops, t-shirts with advertising, etc. are not appropriate dress. Supervisors have the ability to establish responsible dress code requirements for employees under them.

Telephone Tips

We must make every effort to maintain good customer service. Listed below are several tips for a successful telephone conversation –

- Check voice mail frequently throughout the day.
- Maintain an up-to-date and accurate message at all times on your voice mail.
- Answer your phone personally whenever possible; be professional, you should respond by stating NRCS, the field office name, followed by your name and “may I help you?”
- Learn to ignore people’s indifference. People will provoke you only if you let them.
- Turn negative stress into a positive by practicing self-control and maintaining high self-esteem.
- Use self-discipline to maintain an ongoing dialogue; even in difficult situations.
- At some point in your conversation, give everyone you talk to a positive stroke.
- Make a brief apology if there is a problem, and do it with a smile. Callers can always hear it.
- Let the other person talk without interrupting him/her.
- Improve listening by taking accurate notes.
- Ask questions so that you keep in tune with what the caller is thinking; as well as saying.
- Always remember, to each and every person who calls, you are a representative of the Agency.

Office Mail

Most business letters that are mailed use the official postage- and fees-paid privilege. However, they must conform to postal regulations and to Agency mailing procedures. ***Do not use Government letterhead and postage-paid privileges for personal business***, do so will result in negative administrative action up to and including being released from employment. Unless it is an emergency, do not have personal mail or packages sent to your office. It is a violation of Federal laws and regulations to use postage-paid Government envelopes to file job applications.

Your Pay

The general schedule (GS) salary system for white-collar federal employees is what is generally referred to as the “civil service” pay system even though it now covers only just more than half of the workforce.

The GS system is divided into 15 grades, each of which has 10 steps. Entry-level hiring into a grade normally is done at step 1, although various personnel flexibility’s allow hiring at different steps. The grade level of an initial hire depends largely on the occupation, as does the career progression up through the grades.

Employee pay for GS employees in Alaska differs from the 30 or so metropolitan locality pay areas and a catchall “rest of the U.S.” rates that apply in the lower 48. GS employees are paid from the Base GS Pay table at <http://www.opm.gov/oca/> plus a 25% Cost of Living Allowance (COLA). Raises are set by local labor market conditions, subject to the availability of funds appropriated by Congress. USDA federal employees are paid biweekly. Your annual pay rates are based on 26 pay periods of 80 hours each, a total of 2,080 hours for the year. You will receive a salary check (direct deposited) every two weeks on designated paydays.

Time and Attendance (T&A) Records

NRCS uses a web-based timekeeping report system call WebTCAS . Employees are assigned an official timekeeper who assists in the processing of your bi-weekly timesheet. Your supervisor monitors coordinates and confirms your reported work times. Access to WebTCAS will be working during your second week of employment. It may take several pay periods to get the internet application properly functioning. During the interim you may be required to submit a manual timesheet through your supervisor to your timekeeper.

At the end of each biweekly pay period, you will electronically update and transmit your T&A to a Timekeeper who will, in turn, submit it to the National Finance Center (NFC). This T&A will show your time worked, holiday pay, previous leave balance, leave earned, leave taken and current balance. You are responsible to report your times accurately and confirm your entries. Fraudulent or fictitious timesheet will result in release from employment.

Work Schedules

The standard tour of duty for a full-time employee is a 40-hour basic workweek consisting of 5 days of 8 hours each day, Monday through Friday. Core hours are hours designated during which all employees must be at work. The core hours in NRCS are 9:30am-2:30pm.

NRCS participates in a modified Maxiflex and Compressed Work Schedule. For more information on the alternate work schedules please refer to the General Manual. Check with your supervisor to see if these alternate work schedules apply to your office.

Miscellaneous Sources of Compensation

Awards

Agencies have various award systems for their employees as recognition for ongoing good performance, suggestions, and inventions or for special contributions to the agency's mission. Special Act or Service Awards are given for performance that exceeds job requirements as a onetime occurrence. Employees also may be eligible for quality step increases of one step, based on performance.

Nonmonetary awards such as Length of Service Awards, certificates, and similar forms of recognition also can be granted.

Injury Compensation

The Federal Employees Compensation Act (FECA), administered for all by the Labor Department, provides workers' compensation benefits to federal employees who sustain job-related injuries or illnesses. You should report any on-the-job injury to your supervisor as soon as you can.

Overtime

The federal government complies with the Fair Labor Standards Act, which provides for minimum standards for both wages and overtime entitlement, and spells out administrative procedures by which covered work time must be compensated. Under the law, overtime is computed at 1-1 /2 times the rate of basic pay for work exceeding 8 hours a day or 40 hours a week

Within-Grade Increases

General Schedule employees are eligible for within-grade increases, unless they are denied for poor performance, after the following waiting periods: 52 weeks for advancement to steps 2-4; 104 weeks for advancement to steps 5-7; and 156 weeks for advancement to steps 8-10. Also, a “quality step increase” of one step can be awarded under some agency performance incentive programs.

Leave

Annual Leave

Annual leave can be used for whatever purposes you desire. Most people use it for vacations and personal business. Except for emergencies, annual leave must be authorized in advance by your supervisor.

An employee accrues annual leave for each full pay period of employment unless he/she is in a nonpay status for the entire pay period. Annual leave is earned on the basis of the number of years of Federal employment, including creditable military service. The following table outlines the annual leave categories and the accrual rates for each:

Full-Time Employees:

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------|----------------|
| • Less than 3 years of service | 4 hour leave category | 13 days a year |
| • 3 years but less than 15 years of service | 6 hour leave category | 20 days a year |
| • 15 years or more of service | 8 hour leave category | 26 days a year |

Part-Time Employees: (One hour of leave is accrued for each:)

- | | |
|---|------------------------|
| • Less than 3 years of service | 20 hours in pay status |
| • 3 years but less than 15 years of service | 13 hours in pay status |
| • 15 years or more of service | 10 hours in pay status |

Pay status hours which do not equal the number necessary for a minimum leave credit are carried over from one pay period to the next to accumulate toward future leave credits. Employees can carry 30 days (240 hours) of unused annual leave from year to year. You are advised to use your annual leave throughout the year in order to avoid losing accrued leave above the 30-day limit.

Sick Leave

Sick leave may be used when you: receive medical, dental, or optical examination or treatment; are incapacitated by physical or mental illness, injury, pregnancy, or childbirth; would, because of

exposure to a communicable disease, jeopardize the health of others by your presence on the job; or must be absent from work for adoption-related activities. In addition, you may use a limited amount of sick leave to: provide care for a family member as the result of physical or mental illness, injury, pregnancy, childbirth, or medical, dental, or optical examination or treatment; or make arrangements necessitated by the death of a family member or attend the funeral of a family member. For more information about Family Leave benefits, talk to your Supervisor and/or Human Resources.

For full-time employees, the sick leave accrual rate is 13 days a year; for part-time employees, it's one hour for each 20 in pay status. There is no limit on how much can be accumulated.

There are other forms of leave including: compensatory time off; excused absences without loss of pay and without charge to leave; family and medical leave, seven days of paid leave each calendar year (in addition to annual or sick leave) to serve as a bone-marrow donor and 30 days to serve as an organ donor; time off as a form of performance recognition; leave without pay used instead of paid leave for various purposes with supervisory approval; religious reasons, and military leave.

Holidays

There are 10 legal holidays:

- New Years Day—January 1
- Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.—Third Monday in January
- Presidents Day—Third Monday in February
- Memorial Day—Last Monday in May
- Independence Day—July 4
- Labor Day—First Monday in September
- Columbus Day—Second Monday in October
- Veterans Day—November 11
- Thanksgiving Day—Fourth Thursday in November
- Christmas Day—December 25

Health Insurance

The Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program is designed to help protect you and eligible family members from the expenses of illness and accident. Unlike many private sector health benefit plans, it provides coverage without physical examination, places no restrictions on age or physical condition, offers a wide range of plans to choose from, and cannot be canceled by the plan in which you enroll. You must enroll within 60 days of the beginning of your employment, otherwise you will have to wait until the next open season.

You and the government share the cost of the FEHB program. On average, the government pays slightly more than 70 percent of the cost. You pay your share of the premium through a payroll deduction. You can use your FEHB benefits as soon as your coverage is effective. There are no waiting periods, required medical examinations, or restrictions because of age or physical condition.

There are two types of enrollment in each FEHB plan: self only, which provides benefits only to you; and self and family, providing benefits to you and all eligible family members. A self and family enrollment covers you, your spouse, and your unmarried dependent children under age 22.

You can choose from among fee for service (FFS) plans, regardless of where you live, or plans offering a point of service (POS) product and health maintenance organizations (HMO) if you live (or sometimes if you work) within the area serviced by the plan.

Each November the government holds an “open season” in which you may change plans or change levels of coverage if you wish. You can make open season changes by using the Employee Express web site.

Life Insurance

The Federal Employees’ Group Life Insurance (FEGLI) program, as the name implies, provides group term life insurance. In most cases, employees are automatically covered by basic life insurance. In addition to the basic, there are three forms of optional insurance that you can elect. You must have basic insurance in order to elect any of the options. Unlike basic, enrollment in optional insurance is not automatic—you must take action to elect the options.

Unlike the Federal health benefits program, which has annual opportunities to join or change coverage levels, FEGLI open seasons are rare; elections of coverage generally must be made when first offered.

The cost of basic insurance is shared between you and the government. You pay 2/3 of the total cost and the government pays 1/3. Your age does not affect the cost of basic insurance. You pay the full cost of optional insurance; the cost of optional insurance depends on your age. For insurance withholding purposes, the government assumes you reach an age in your first pay period that starts after your birthday.

Most Federal employees, including part-time employees, are eligible to enroll. Basic life insurance coverage is effective on the first day you enter in a pay and duty status unless you waive this coverage before the end of your first pay period. You may waive basic at any time. Optional insurance generally must be elected within 31 days of appointment.

Hospital Insurance Tax (Hit)

All employees contribute a portion of their earnings towards the Medicare Hospital Insurance Tax. This tax is included in the FICA deductions for employees who pay the social security tax; while other employees have a specified amount withheld from their salary. HIT or FICA taxes are taken from an employee’s gross earnings and are discontinued when yearly earnings reach the maximum wage base level determined by the Social Security Administration.

Retirement

Almost without doubt you are in the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS). That system generally covers everyone hired since January 1, 1984. However, if you had previous Federal employment under the “old” Federal retirement program, the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS), and were rehired, you may have been rehired under that system, called CSRS-Offset, which is a mix of CSRS and Social Security coverage. For more information about retirement, see the OPM website at www.opm.gov.

If you're not sure which retirement system applies to you, be sure to find out. The systems have fundamental differences in how benefits accumulate.

FERS is a three-part retirement system consisting of Social Security coverage, a civil service annuity, and the Thrift Savings Plan. In general, FERS employees contribute 7.5 percent of pay to cover the cost of their benefits: 1.3 percent is paid to the civil service retirement fund and goes to cover their basic annuity benefit and 6.2 percent goes to pay for Social Security benefits (the total amount is scheduled to decrease to 7 percent in 2002).

In addition, they pay 1.45 percent for Medicare coverage; there is no cap on Medicare deductions. FERS employees retiring with an unreduced annuity after 30 years will receive a basic benefit equal to 30 percent of their high-3 years of average salary as compared to 56.25 percent for CSRS and CSRS-Offset employees. FERS employees will be eligible for a Social Security benefit at age 62.

Survivor Benefits Upon Death of Employee

Federal retirement systems protect your loved ones. Under FERS the surviving spouse of an employee who had at least 18 months of creditable civilian service may be eligible for a basic employee death benefit, so long as the spouse:

- was married to the deceased for an aggregate of at least nine months (the nine-month requirement does not apply if the death was accidental); or
- was the parent of a child born of the marriage (including one born posthumously, or out of wedlock if the parties later married).

This benefit may be payable to a former spouse (in whole or in part) if a qualifying court so orders. The rules are somewhat different for those under the old CSRS retirement system.

The Thrift Savings Plan

The Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) is a valuable way to build up a nest egg for your retirement. It's the government's version of the popular 401(k) plan. The TSP is a payroll withholding based plan. Investments are from pre-tax dollars and investment earnings are tax deferred until withdrawn. FERS employees are allowed to invest up to 15 percent, up to a threshold set annually by the IRS (in 2005, \$14,000). In 2006, input limits will not be based on percentage of pay but rather restrict to a total limit of \$15,000 per year. Your agency will automatically contribute an amount equal to 1 percent of your basic pay each pay period. You make your own contribution by payroll deductions and your agency matches those contributions according to the following schedule:

FERS Employee Investment—Agency Match

First 3% of basic pay \$1.00 for each \$1.00 you invest
 Next 2% of basic pay \$0.50 for each \$1.00 you invest
 Next 8% of basic pay 0 (9% in 2004; 10% in 2005)

CSRS and CSRS-Offset employees may invest up to 10 percent of salary in the program; they get no government contributions.

The TSP holds twice-yearly open seasons in which you can begin investments, change the amount of investment or change the allocation of how much money you have going into each of the TSP's investment funds. You also can move your account balances among the funds whenever you choose, up to once a month, through interfund transfers. The TSP sends participants statements during the open seasons showing their account balances, loan status, vesting status and other information.

You can begin contributing your own money to the TSP within 60 days of being hired as a Federal employee. Your payroll contributions will begin the first full pay period after your agency accepts your TSP Election Form (TSP-1).

Beginning in the last month of the second open season after you are hired, your agency will start to contribute Agency Automatic (1%) Contributions and the Agency Matching Contributions to your account. Depending on how the open season coincides with a hiring date, this could mean a wait of nearly a year. Agency matching contributions don't start until the employee's own investments begin.

Investment Choices

Currently, the TSP has five investment funds available:

- the Government Securities Investment Fund (G Fund), special Treasury issues with an average maturity date of about 14 years;
- the Common Stock Index Fund (C Fund), which tracks the Standard and Poor's 500 index of large U.S. stocks;
- the Fixed Income Index Investment Fund (F Fund), a combination of corporate and government bonds;
- the Small Capitalization Stock Index Investment (S) Fund, tracking the Wilshire 4500 (S Fund); and
- the International Stock Index Investment (I) Fund, which tracks the Morgan Stanley EAFE index (I Fund).

In-Service Loans and Withdrawals

You may gain access to your money during your working career through loans (and in-service withdrawals). When you take a TSP loan, you are borrowing from yourself. Loans are repaid through payroll allotments over the payment period specified in the loan agreement. You can repay the loan in full—plus any unpaid interest—before the end of your loan repayment schedule without penalty. For more information regarding TSP, please use the TSP website at www.tsp.gov or the TSP ThriftLine at (504) 255-8777.

Types of Appointments

There are various types of Federal appointments. You will receive a copy of Form SF-50-B, "Notification of Personnel Action". The "nature of action" block on this form will indicate the type of appointment you have. Your particular type of appointment will determine your eligibility for Federal benefits.

Career-Conditional Appointment—This is the most common type of appointment. You must serve a probationary period of 1 year. If your service is satisfactory for 3 continuous years in this appointment, you may be converted to a career appointment.

Career Appointment—After you serve your probationary period and complete 3 substantially continuous years of service, you can expect to be converted to a career appointment. This is the most permanent of all appointments within the Federal Service. This appointment provides you with greater employment and job retention rights.

Excepted Appointment— Certain positions are excepted from the normal requirements of competitive service by law, executive order, or Office of Personnel Management regulations. Many excepted appointments (180 day limit type) have a limit of two years on the position. Employees appointed to excepted positions do not go through the same kind of competitive process as career or career-conditional appointees; therefore, they do not receive the same benefits or employment rights.

TERM Appointment—The Agency may make a term appointment for a period of more than one year, but not more than four years when the need for an employee's services is not permanent. Reasons for making a term appointment include, but are not limited to: project work; extraordinary workload; scheduled abolishment, reorganization, or contracting out of the function; uncertainty of future funding; or the need to maintain permanent positions for placement of employees who would otherwise be displaced from other parts of the organization. Employees converted to TERM appointments will be entitled to some additional benefits such as health and life insurance and retirement credit.

Temporary Appointment—Occasionally, the Agency needs employees for immediate short-term jobs. Employees in temporary appointments do not receive the same benefits as permanent employees. They do not have the same employment rights, do not participate in the retirement system, and are not eligible for health and life insurance benefits.

Travel

Many employees travel to attend training courses or to conduct official Government business. An employee on official travel is expected to exercise the same care in incurring expenses that a person would when traveling on personal business. All travel is to be coordinated with your supervisor to avoid overtime compensation work periods (when possible) and high travel costs. Discuss travel with your supervisor prior to making final travel plans.

Per Diem

All travel must be approved by your supervisor. If you are required to travel for these purposes, you will be reimbursed for expenses essential to the transaction of official business. Allowable costs include transportation, per diem, which consists of lodging up to a certain amount, and a meal and incidental expenses (M&IE) allowance. Not all expenses incurred while traveling are considered necessary. Please refer to your agencies General Manual or Procedure for more specific details on travel.

Government Travel Credit Card

Employees are mandated to use their government-issued travel charge card to pay for reimbursable travel expenses. All permanent employees who travel at least twice a year must participate in the government travel charge card program.

Employees who use the charge card for inappropriate or non-official purposes or who fail to pay their account balance in a timely manner will be subject to disciplinary action, which can range from a letter of reprimand to removal from duty.

Employees are encouraged to charge as many official travel expenses to the charge card as possible since this will help maximize the rebates paid to the government by the bank.

Government Owned Vehicles (Gov)

Government owned vehicles (GOV), when available may be used by employees for official purposes only. When possible, as assigned, GOV will be shared with other personnel to eliminate the use of a privately-owned vehicle. If an employee is required to be an incidental motor vehicle operator they will be required to maintain a valid State Driver's License. Employees who fail to maintain a valid driver's license or who misuse a GOV may be subject to disciplinary action including possible removal. Willful misuse of government owned vehicles carries a mandatory penalty of 30 days suspension without pay.

Job Protections

Anti-Discrimination Laws

Federal employees are protected from discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and the Equal Pay Act of 1963, and Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. These laws are enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Generally speaking, under those laws it is illegal to discriminate in any aspect of employment including: hiring and firing; compensation, assignment, or classification of employees; transfer, promotion, layoff, or recall; and recruitment and testing. Discriminatory practices under those laws also include: harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, or age.

Title VII also prohibits discrimination because of participation in schools or places of worship associated with a particular racial, ethnic, or religious group. The law prohibits not only intentional discrimination, but also practices that have the effect of discriminating against individuals because of their race, color, national origin, religion, or sex.

Appeal Rights

Career employees receiving disciplinary actions from their supervisor may be eligible to appeal to the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB). Another form of appeal is the administrative grievance, which normally covers workplace disputes and disciplinary actions not within the MSPB's jurisdiction.

NRCS encourages early resolution of workplace and program disputes using the Alternative Dispute Resolution Program. These procedures vary, contact Human Resources.

Ethics and Political Activities

Ethical Conduct

Underlying ethical principles for federal employees are two core concepts:

- employees shall not use public office for private gain; and
- employees shall act impartially and not give preferential treatment to any private organization or individual.

In addition, employees must avoid any action that would create the appearance that they are violating the law or ethical standards.

Rules govern subjects such as giving or accepting gifts, outside employment, abuse of position, required financial disclosures in certain situations, and similar matters. New employees are required to complete the Ethic Training Modules at <http://www.usda-ethics.net/> during their first 30 days of appointment. Employees are required yearly to complete refresher training.

GOVERNMENT PROPERTY

Employees have a duty to protect and conserve Government property and should not use Government property for other than authorized purposes. Government property includes items such as office supplies, telephone and other telecommunications equipment and services, Government mail, automated data processes capabilities, printing and reproduction facilities, Government records, and Government vehicles.

USDA policy provides for limited personal use of Government telecommunications equipment on an occasional basis, provided that the use involves minimal expense to the Government and does not interfere with official business. Occasional personal use of telecommunications resources shall normally take place during the employee's personal time.

While the occasional use of telecommunications resources in moderation is acceptable, uses not conforming the USDA policy are strictly prohibited. Employees are expected to conduct themselves professionally in the workplace and to refrain from using telecommunications equipment for activities that are inappropriate or offensive to co-workers or the public, such as sexually explicit materials or remarks that ridicule others on the basis of race, creed, religion, color, sex, handicap, national origin, or sexual orientation. Questions concerning appropriate use of Government telecommunications equipment should be addressed to your supervisor.

Political Activities

Under the 1939 Hatch Act, Federal employees face restrictions on their ability to participate in political activities. Congress amended the Hatch Act in 1993 to permit more political activity although many restrictions still apply. Certain agencies and categories of employees, primarily in national security and law enforcement, are covered by the stricter rules that predate that amendment.

Generally speaking, Federal employees covered by the 1993 amendments **may**:

- be candidates for public office in nonpartisan elections;
- register and vote as they choose;
- assist in voter registration drives;
- express opinions about candidates and issues;
- contribute money to political organizations;
- attend political fundraising functions;
- attend and be active at political rallies and meetings;
- join and be an active member of a political party or club;
- sign nominating petitions;
- campaign for or against referendum questions, constitutional amendments, or municipal ordinances;
- campaign for or against candidates in partisan elections;
- make campaign speeches for candidates in partisan elections;
- distribute campaign literature in partisan elections; and
- hold office in political clubs or parties.

They **may not**:

- use official authority or influence to interfere with an election;
- solicit or discourage political activity of anyone with business before their agency;
- solicit or receive political contributions (may be done in certain limited situations by federal labor or other employee organizations);
- be candidates for public office in partisan elections;
- engage in political activity while on duty, in a government office, wearing an official uniform or using a government vehicle; or
- wear political buttons on duty.

Promotions and Transfers

Agencies may promote, demote or reassign career or career-conditional employees under a variety of circumstances. They also may make time-limited promotions of up to five years to fill temporary positions, accomplish project work, fill positions temporarily pending reorganization, or to meet other temporary needs.

Generally, General Schedule employees who are promoted to a higher grade must receive a pay increase of at least two steps of the former grade.

A career or career-conditional employee of one agency may transfer, without a break in service, to a competitive service position in another agency without competing in a civil service examination open to the public. A transfer-eligible may apply under vacancy announcements open to status candidates. An employee may transfer to a position at the same, higher, or lower grade level.

Present Federal employees who are serving in the competitive service under a career or career conditional appointment have eligibility for transfer to a position in the competitive service. To transfer, they must meet the qualification requirements for the position. Employees must be found suitable for employment in competitive service positions. If the current appointment is subject to a suitability investigation, that condition continues after the transfer.

Position Classification

Under the General Schedule (GS) system, jobs are categorized by occupational groups, series, classes, and grades. This system ensures that positions that are similar require comparable qualifications, and that employees who are doing substantially equal work receive equal pay.

The system is designed to provide a systematic grouping of positions by kind of work, level of difficulty and responsibility, and required qualifications of the position.

The classification system is based on a set of written standards and guides, which are used by trained specialists to evaluate and classify positions. Standards are issued by the Office of Personnel Management for use throughout the Government. Consequently, employee performance is not considered in the classification process. Employee performance is rewarded through a system of within-grade increases, quality increases, and awards for superior accomplishment. Other factors not considered in classifying a position are volume of work performed, and employee's length of service, or superior qualifications.

Position Description

Your supervisor will provide you with a description of your job. A position description is the official record of your major duties and responsibilities and the supervisory relationship of your position.

The duties and responsibilities that have been assigned to you will determine your title, the kind of position you occupy, the level or grade, series, and also the base pay that you will receive for performing the work.

If significant changes take place in your job, your supervisor should take immediate steps to see that a new position description is prepared and submitted for classification review. She/he must make certain that it represents the current duties and responsibilities that are assigned to you.

You and your supervisor have joint responsibility for reviewing your position description, annually, for accuracy and adequacy.

Performance Standards

All employees must have an individual performance plan. A performance work plan is a written document that identifies critical elements of an employee's position and the standards by which they will be rated. A critical element is a work assignment or responsibility of such importance that unacceptable performance on the element would result in a determination that the employee's overall performance is at the unacceptable or "Results Not Achieved" level. Non-critical duties are not included in performance plans.

Communication between the rating official and the employee is essential in developing performance work plans. There should be a common understanding about the expectations for performance. In addition, there should be a discussion of the goals of the individual work unit and the employee's involvement, or contribution, to unit goals for the upcoming year.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) helps employees resolve personal and work problems through professional assistance. The EAP helps with the following types of problems—marital, financial, alcohol, drugs, family, vocational, work related stress, legal referral, weight/weight loss, physical/medical, dependent care, emotional/psychological, and any other problems that may surface.

EAP encourages voluntary participation. If a person thinks they have a problem, they call the EAP number and set up an appointment. A professional EAP counselor will work directly and confidentially with the employee or family member to help resolve the problem. In some cases, the

EAP counselor's role will be to assist in determining what additional community resources can provide future assistance.

The cost of EAP is covered by your employer. Costs associated with referral may be covered by Medical benefits. Call the NRCS EAP vendor: The Sands Creek Group, LTD 1(888) 243-5744, or TDD—800-627-3529. Their website is at: <http://www.sandcreekeap.com/>.

A Message From Human Resources

Before the Internet, it was sometimes difficult and often frustrating to find out about human resources regulations and entitlements. Now you can do just about anything online. You can also find the answer to almost any conceivable question you have quickly and easily. We have developed the Human Resources website specifically for you. We feel that the website, as well as this guide provide you with the information you need to take full advantage of your Federal benefits. You are always welcome to contact us with any issue or concern, but we highly recommend that you use the tools provided on the web to stay up to date on Federal employee benefits and information. To have a successful career and to take full advantage of your benefits, we recommend that you make it a priority to develop a sound foundational knowledge of human resources.